

New Years' Resolutions and Related Motivational Matters

I usually don't make a New Year's Resolution, but this year I made one. Like many commitments, it is important to avoid overreaching. The Resolution must be feasibly within your ability, yet still inspiring.

Being an aged male, demonstrations of physical improvement are always inspirational, but running a 4-minute mile or perhaps competing in the X-Games (the Boulder-equivalent of a 4-minute mile) are well-beyond us. A weight loss objective is a perennial favorite, but lacks ancillary bragging rights. What could I resolve to do?

As a teenage asthmatic, I had trouble with aerobic activities, and never excelled at them. Even 6 minute school wrestling matches proved problematic. At a high school reunion, Dick Grossman recalled that he used to toss my inhaler to me, between periods of my pubertic matches. But I was a strong little bastard, and once threw future Olympian Larry Zilverberg to the mat, before he cleaned my clock once I ran out of gas. ¹

That strength came from weightlifting. My beloved Uncle Norm was a bodybuilder, and looked like Danny Kaye with muscles. He knew that weightlifting took little aerobic capacity, and would be suitable for an asthmatic. So he introduced me to weightlifting, and to the (one-time!) strength and fitness empire of the legendary Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell Co. Through Hoffman's Strength and Health magazine -- a much better publication than those currently owned and operated by the manufacturers of steroidal food supplements -- I was enthralled by the achievements of the US Olympic Men's Weightlifting team. Hoffman coached (and I suppose funded) the US team, which won many medals in the 1950s and 60s.² I took particular interest in the exploits of the greatest of them all -- [Isaac Berger](#). Here was a Jew the same size as me, who won the US title as a teenager, and in short order became a two-time World Champion and three-time Olympic medalist. He was also ordained as a Cantor! Ike Berger was never a national celebrity, although I once saw him on the Tonight Show, where he tried to teach Johnny Carson how to lift.

¹ I re-met Larry -- a three-time NCAA All-American who lost only four times in his career -- at a party decades later. I was surprised to find that he remembered this deplorable incident from his youth.

² The men's team has since fallen on hard times.

Until I read about Ike, I never knew that G-d made Jews like that. I later learned that my dad looked a little like [Barney Ross](#), the great lightweight and welterweight boxing champ.³

Olympic lifts require one to hoist the bar overhead, starting from the floor. Currently, there are two lifts: the snatch and the clean-and-jerk. The snatch requires lifting the bar all the way overhead without stopping. In the clean-and-jerk, the lifter is permitted to hoist the bar to the shoulders first, and then after a brief pause, the bar must be rammed overhead. It is known as the "King of Lifts".

Unlike the bench press, squat, and other lifts commonly done with a barbell, both the snatch and clean-and-jerk require much speed and technique in addition to strength. As a teenager, I was able to snatch my bodyweight, and clean-and-jerk 50 pounds more than my bodyweight. The weight training not only improved my fitness, but added much self-esteem as I realized that most teenagers couldn't lift that much overhead. But training was tough on the knees and back, and I eventually gave it up in favor of the weight machines that are ubiquitous in modern day "fitness centers". Weight machines are good and very safe when used as intended, but after finishing a set of 10 reps or whatever, one still lacks the palpable sense of achievement earned by hoisting a heavy weight overhead.

So sometime around the start of 2010, I resolved to clean-and-jerk my bodyweight on my next birthday, even though I hadn't done that in many decades.⁴ I knew those weight machines had kept my strength up, using the revolutionary [SuperSlow protocol](#) over the last 15 years or so. The main challenge would be to avoid injury while re-acquiring the speed and barbell technique I had way back then. But my birthday was less than two months

³ I don't think that Hollywood is anti-semitic, but there is no rational reason for the absence of a modern day biopic about Ross and his amazing life (titleholder in three divisions, who got and beat the drug monkey off his back, and won the Silver Star for bravery in WW II combat). This is a much more interesting story than that of Heavyweight champ James J. Braddock, played by Russell Crowe in the film "Cinderella Man".

⁴ Because the fitness center I used had neither the room nor a lifting platform necessary to permit practice of the more intricate and [dangerous snatch lift](#), I chose to do the clean-and-jerk. Lest you think that lifting your bodyweight overhead would be a worthy achievement for a real lifter, check out this video of Naim Suleymanoglu -- the 4' 11" chain-smoking, womanizing, Turkish national hero known as "The Pocket Hercules" -- first snatching some ridiculously heavy weight, and then making a 418 lb. clean and jerk; [more than three times his bodyweight!](#) Competitive Olympic weightlifters are among the strongest and most flexible athletes in the world.

away. I resolved to train for the lift twice per week, and to keep my weight down -- every pound I lost was one less to lift!

Telecommuting workers are urged to dress like they are still working downtown, in order to maintain the business-warrior ethic that is the hallmark of American enterprise. Similarly, I decided to dress for training like Ike Berger did in competition. A Google search soon located a nifty pair of Adidas weightlifting shoes (nowadays they are chrome-plated, like an old Cadillac DeVille) and an Adidas weightlifting singlet designed for the Athens Olympics. Check out the suit on me:



The sympathetic gym owners (Kathy and Scott Grayell of the Iron Works, on North Broadway in Boulder) weren't angry when my clinking barbell plates once set off their intruder alarm, which was intended to sense a tinkling window when smashed by a burglar. They did worry that I would hurt myself, but that made three of us, so I was careful to warm up, wear a serious weightlifting belt, and maintain proper form. In addition, one can perform a heavier clean by catching the bar on the shoulders as one sinks into a full squat. But it is easier to injure the knees this way, so I further handicapped myself by resolving to lift the barbell higher before dipping slightly to catch it on my clavicle -- this is called a *power clean*. Both the snatch and the power clean-and-jerk are seen on the [short video](#).

At first, I was afraid that I would have to make a personal best on my birthday. But I managed to make the big lift once in each of the two practice sessions prior to the fateful day. This buoyed my confidence sufficiently to invite our neighbors to join my wife and I at the gym on my Saturday

evening birthdate-with-destiny. I resolved to fete all of us to a party immediately after, no matter the outcome.

[I made the lift, as seen in this video](#). My form was crap, but I did get the thing overhead somehow. Of course, Ike Berger used to lift *well in excess of twice his bodyweight* overhead -- view this wonderfully grainy footage of [Ike in action](#).

For readers contemplating something similar, pick a simple, easier to master lift that you are already performing (e.g. the benchpress). Learn the proper form if you haven't already⁵. Practice only twice per week, leaving plenty of time to build strength through resting. Eat plenty of lean protein meals to build strength while losing weight. Happy New Year's Resolution!

⁵ A knowledgeable personal trainer (I stress the word "knowledgeable") can critique your form to make it both safe and effective.